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ON THE TEACHING OF GERMAN[1]

By ROBERT H. FIFE, JR.

THE teacher of German who reviews the situation at the present time may well take as his subject the title of Burke's famous essay, "Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontent." He is called upon for the same qualities which John Adams in 1776 demanded of him who would manage the United Colonies: "The meekness of Moses, the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, added to the valor of David." As a result of the drive against the study of the German language in the past two years, the whole field of German instruction is like a country swept by a hurricane. Here and there in some protected spot a farm or grove has been spared, but in the main the work of destruction is complete. Trees are uprooted, houses unroofed, fences laid flat, and blooming crops swept to ruin. In our high school German departments the devastation has been no less complete. To a great extent these departments have been badly crippled or utterly destroyed, the teachers have been driven into other work, for which they are only insufficiently prepared, and in some sections the teaching of the language has been made illegal. The hysteria of war-time psychology, aided by the efforts of time-serving politicians, could not well go further than it has in many sections of the country. The preparatory schools, it is true, as well as the endowed colleges and the technical schools, sheltered behind their conservative walls from the waves of popular excitement, are in somewhat better case; but the higher institutions have their own problem, for here the elementary and intermediate classes are crowded, while the number of young men and women entering college with two or three years of German preparation is approaching the vanishing point. The prospects are that soon practically all the high school graduates who take German in college will find themselves in the elementary courses, while in the

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[1] A paper read before the Eleventh Annual Session of the New York State Modern Language Association, Albany, November 25, 1919.

Freshman and Sophomore years the advanced courses will be reserved for the graduates of private preparatory schools.

It is manifest that the effect on secondary education of this sweeping from the program of a well-developed subject has been little short of disastrous. Two years ago, when the war-wave swept over us, German was among the best-taught subjects in our high schools, and teachers of German were well on the way to develop a methodology that should set a fast pace for other language teachers. The results of the drive against German have shown themselves in the overcrowding of French and Spanish classes and in a reduction of personal efficiency on the part of the teachers of these subjects, many of whom have been forced to take them without adequate preparation. The net result of it all is the keen disappointment of students and parents with the results and a growing disregard by school administrators of proper methods and purposes of language instruction.

It is now our duty to face the situation as it is, our duty no less as patriots than as pedagogues. Never was the uselessness of crying over spilt milk more apparent than in this crisis. The drive against German was a perfectly natural and perfectly logical effect of war-time psychology, and the teacher of German, in the main, as innocent a victim of war as any ever dragged to the altar of Mars. We have made our sacrifice to patriotism and are entitled to all the precious benefits of adversity. "To endure trampling upon with patience and self-control," said Mr. Gladstone to John Morley during the bitter fight over Home Rule in 1893, "is no bad element in the preparation of a man for walking firmly and successfully in the path of great public duty. Be sure that discipline is full of blessings."[2] During the war our patriotic duty demanded that we keep silence in the face of misunderstanding and vituperation: now no less a patriotic duty demands that we adjust ourselves to the new situation and reconstruct that which has been destroyed in order to defend America's position in the world. We must do this even at the cost of personal sacrifice, that our boys and girls may go forth to the peaceful international competition equipped with just as good weapons as the boys and girls of Europe. It cannot be denied that the knowledge of German, one of the few major languages of civilization, is one of these weapons.

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[2] John Morley, *Recollections* I. 365.

In this connection, permit me to quote a passage from the Report of the British Commission, appointed by Mr. Asquith in 1916, whose findings, after the examination of 137 witnesses from many walks of professional and scholastic life, must be known to you all:

> "Before the war German was perhaps the first language from the points of view of information. . . . In philosophy and in those sciences and quasi-sciences in which new knowledge is constantly acquired and general conceptions undergo frequent modifications, no student who wished to keep abreast of the times could afford to ignore German publications. This position was strengthened by the industry and competence of German translators. Important works of learning and literature, produced in languages not generally known, such as Dutch and Russian, were often accessible only in German translations. . . . If Germany after the war is still enterprising, formidable no less in trade than in arms, we cannot afford to ignore her for a moment. Knowledge of Germany by specialists will not suffice: it must be wide-spread throughout the people. A democracy cannot afford to be ignorant."[3]

It is apparent that these words apply with double force to America at the present time. It is trite to say that our relation to Europe since 1917 has radically changed. Despite ourselves and as the result of forces whose unhalting trend no group or generation of men can alter, we have become an immediate neighbor of all the European peoples; and however much we may wish to isolate ourselves from their influence, it is but a counsel of ignorance when we are told that we must shut ourselves up again in our tower of ivory. Only one item need be mentioned here: we have loaned more than ten billion dollars to the nations of Europe, and they are so far from being able to discharge this obligation that even the interest is to be funded. Bankers and business men tell us that this is only a beginning. In the new Europe we find a Germany which is assuredly still "enterprising, highly organized, and industrious."

Moreover we find that in a new and important sense Germany has become an intermediate language for the countries east of the

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[3] *Modern Studies, being a Report of the Committee on the Position of Modern Languages in the Educational System of Great Britain*, H.M.S. Office 1918, pp. 59–60.

Vistula, the March, and the Leitha. Ten, perhaps more, new nations have risen on the ruins of what was once Russia and Austria-Hungary. A long line of ancient peoples, shot through with new national ambitions and with a new world of culture in their loins, lies between the Baltic and the Adriatic, each intent on pushing forward its civilization and of course its language as the chief representative of that civilization. America has stood sponsor for these nations, and America cannot close her eyes to them, nor to the Russia that lies to the east of them, as fields for trade and foci of civilization. We cannot learn their languages, and fortunately it is not necessary to do that in order to communicate with them. Business men, professional men and scholars of standing among them are all bi-lingual. We must perforce use German, which has been the *lingua franca* of these peoples for many generations. Without German we cannot successfully compete for their trade. Without German we cannot share their discoveries or inventions, follow the experiments of their scientists, nor enter into their philosophy, history, and literature. Unless we are to see them only through the eyes of Germans and know and trade with them only through the intermediation of Germans, we must ourselves know German. Now, more than ever, it is clear that the American boy or girl who aspires to do more than tickle the surface of culture must know two European languages—French, the language of Western Europe, and German, no less the language of all of Europe lying east of the Rhine. Says the British Commission:

> "No country can afford to rely upon its domestic stores of knowledge. The whole civilized world is a co-operative manufactory of knowledge. In science, technical and pure, in history, antiquities, law, politics, economics, philosophy, new researches are constantly leading to new discoveries, new and fruitful ideas are giving new pointers to thought, new applications of old principles are being made, old stores are being re-arranged, classified and made available for new purposes. In this work all the civilized countries of the world collaborate, and in no branch of knowledge, abstract or concrete, disinterested or applied to the uses of man, can the specialist neglect the work of foreign students."[4]

If America is to keep pace with the other foremost nations, it must know what the other branches of the knowledge factory are producing. It cannot know this without German, and this applies not only to the twenty-one universities and eight technical universities of Germany and the German universities in Austria and Bohemia, but also to the universities at Agram, Budapest, Lemberg, Cracow, Warsaw and Riga, not to mention those in Russia and Sweden, Norway and Denmark. It would certainly suit us better if these centers of thought communicated with the outside world in English: in view of the history of the emancipation of the Eastern nationalities, it would be politically more natural if most of them did so in French. But the presence between them and Western Europe of seventy millions of German-speaking people and the speech-habits of a thousand years bring it about that Baltic and Slavic and Magyar philosopher and historian and economist, chemist and physicist and mineralogist can communicate with America only through German.[5]

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[4] Ibid., pp. 30, 31.

It has often been objected that these higher aims are only for the colleges and technical schools and universities, not for the American high school, a large majority of whose students seek no further education. It is quite true that the colleges and their feeding preparatory schools—whose patrons insist on having the best—retained and in many cases emphasized the study of German even through the war years. But is not equality of educational opportunity for all the greatest hope of democracy? While England at the present time, under the leadership of Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, is doing everything to bring its secondary education and higher education into closer alliance, America's duty is to develop still further the system which gives to every boy and girl the opportunity to prepare for leadership, for in America every boy and girl is potentially a leader. Those of us who have been for years on the firing line of modern language teaching know well enough the necessity for beginning the study of a foreign modern language in the high school years. Unless it is begun in those years, the chances for its really useful acquisition are very small.

[5] Cf. the report of a recent traveler in Jugo-Slavia, Major Sherman M. Craiger: "There was no propaganda against the use of the German language, as most Slavs are as familiar with that tongue as with their own. The business men of Jugo-Slavia find it advantageous to employ German for commercial purposes, and it is the only practical vehicle of communication between the Slavs and the western world. Americans who expect to do business in middle Europe should take this to heart." *N. Y. Sunday Times.* Jan. 11, 1920 (IV, 4).

But admitting that all of this is so—and schoolmen are pretty well agreed on this subject—what are we going to do about it? Prejudice against the study of German, like other expressions of war-time psychology, is a result of our national concentration on a great task, and like the sugar shortage, labor unrest, and high prices, one of the results of the conflict that promises to remain long after the conflict is over. Here once more it is our patriotic duty to face the situation with courage and hope. Abnormal mental states are more difficult to cure than most bodily ills, nevertheless in the healthy individual they gradually yield to treatment; and American public opinion is a healthy organism, where the most obstinate fixed ideas finally give way. Experts tell us that when convalescence from a mental crisis begins, the patient's recovery may be hastened by an appeal to sound argument. Public opinion in this country is ardent and mercurial on the surface, but beneath thoroughly sound; and in the end always responds to appeals to a sound and healthy patriotism.

In facing the situation, we must do so with the consciousness that the world has changed in many ways during the war and that especially the teacher of German has to make many readjustments. Through its planetary nature the struggle has given to the study of all modern languages a new significance. The danger of ignorance is especially emphasized in the British Report:

> "The war has made this people conscious of its ignorance of foreign countries and their peoples. A democratic government requires an instructed people; and for the first time this people is desirous of instruction. . . . It cannot be said that before the war knowledge of foreign countries and their peoples was sufficient in ministers, politicians, journalists, civil servants, university professors, schoolmasters, men of business, or in any class of those whose function it was to instruct and guide the public. . . . Thus the classes and masses were ignorant alike to the point of public danger."[6]

How true that is of America at the present day! It behooves us to go at the matter of enlightenment without delay, for every true patriot must be appalled at the danger which threatens our country through the ignorance of foreign languages and conditions on the part of leaders of public opinion. Thus it is well that both the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers and the

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[6] Pp. 31, 32.

American Modern Language Association have appointed committees to make at least a preliminary survey of the situation in America. A proper survey, however, must not be confined to schoolmen, but must embrace men of other professions, and men of affairs whose interest lies in the enlightenment of public opinion.

That there must be a readjustment both in the subject-matter of instruction and its method must be plain to every teacher of German. Many things have been swept away which the German instructor often in his ignorance dwelt upon too earnestly, not to say too affectionately. Gone are the trappings of feudalism and materialism, the favorite and as the results showed, the by no means harmless hobby of certain instructors. Gone are the picturesque machinery of autocracy and the theories of "dualistic" government. Gone are the rigid social classifications, gone the chapters on the military and trading fleets, gone above all the caste-hardened military system. Even words have taken on a different meaning, such as *Reich* and *Landtag*, which have quite changed their connotation since November 9, 1918. *Verwaltung*, *Behörde*, *Magistrat* (the fountain of all the dread "*Verbotens*") are symbols of something quite new. All the chapters on politics and administration (think of that on taxation!) will have to be re-written for the new handbook on Germany, which must also revise its ethnographical and linguistic material. Alsace, West Prussia, Posen, Schleswig, Danzig are topics that suggest radical alterations. On the other hand, new material must be added. Austria must now be treated adequately in every discussion of the political and social background of the German-speaking peoples. The culture of Vienna is henceforth as important for us as that of Berlin; Linz and Graz are for the student of German cities as essential subjects as Stuttgart and Augsburg; the folklore of Styria and the Tyrol as noteworthy expressions of the German soul as that of the Schwarzwald and Thüringen. Indeed, the whole basis for the study of the social and economic organization of German lands must be surveyed anew and new points of view formulated.

But how much remains for him who conceives of the study of a modern language as the beginning of the pursuit of a great ideal, the so-called "cultural aim." In this connection, the Report from which I have quoted so freely says:

> "The practical aim of education is to enable men to live as individuals and citizens. The idealistic aim of education is to enable men to live better. . . . Early we should also aspire to make some of our boys and girls understand that foreign languages are not learned as an end in themselves, but as a means to the comprehension of foreign peoples, whose history is full of fascinating adventure, who have said and felt and seen and made things worthy of our comprehension, who are now alive and engaged in like travail with ourselves and therefore can the better help us to understand what is the whole truth."[7]

In this readjustment to the new relations of German-speaking lands within and without, it is refreshing to remember that the basic character of the German people and the popular expression of national culture have not changed and cannot change. War alters exteriors only. German folkpoetry survived the Thirty Years War and bloomed forth again after a century and a half in Goethe and Bürger. The popular drama passed undestroyed through the dissolution and resolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to reappear in Lessing. It may indeed be that the results of the Great War and the social revolution will stimulate again philosophy and literature and music, as did the results of the French Revolution, and that a romantic age will follow on Germany's humiliation and re-birth after the fall of the Guglielmian state like that which followed the fall of the Frederician. The really great names in German literature and culture remain as aloof as ever from political contamination. Goethe and Schiller, Grillparzer and Hebbel and Keller mean as much to the world as they did in the microscopic days before the birth of Pan-Germanism. The great lyricists from Eichendorff to Liliencron are aseptic of politics. Where does one find in the novel from *Wilhelm Meister* to *Jörn Uhl* aught save the truest human appeal!

This is also manifestly true of philosophy and the natural sciences. The award of three Nobel prizes in physics and chemistry to German university teachers in the very year of the Peace Treaty testifies that Germany is still an important part of the "co-operative manufactory of knowledge" and demonstrates how little Americans can afford to neglect the productions of German scientists. As teachers of German we must think of our subject less in terms of politics and more in terms of the widest culture. Here we still have at hand for our students the great storehouses of science, poetry and art. Here we shall find that the Great War, like other wars, has failed to touch the real substantive material, whose value made for the study of German the position which it occupied in America before 1914.

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[7] Ibid., pp. 46, 48.

On the other hand, the intense national competition begotten by the war teaches us the necessity for making what we teach immediately usable. We in this country have too often looked upon the study of modern languages as contributing in some undefined way to the student's uplift and development, with an aim as indefinite as the prayers of Chateaubriand, which he claimed to have directed out into the great dark Unknown. The much-criticised Students' Army Training Corps taught this one thing—that to be worthy of the student's time, that which he learns must be *immediately* usable. For this purpose emphasis must be placed directly on the student's special need, whether for business, for professional preparation or for one of the many branches of technical work. Oral and aural work assume through the war a new and vital importance. Thoroughness of method and a constant revision and re-orientation of aim and purpose must replace the old mental attitude that if the boy or girl successfully passed the examination, some way, somehow, love's labor would not be lost. Above all, our attention should constantly be focused on one great aim, to fill the need of our country for men and women trained in the knowledge of foreign peoples. For that purpose, books on German popular culture and on the present and prospective position of the German-speaking lands among the nations ought to form an important part of the subject-matter of instruction for all pupils from the elementary year.

In spite of the deplorable situation which has come as a by-product of the war for the freeing of Europe, and of Germany herself, there is much at the present moment to encourage the teacher of German. The war has brought it about that men of affairs take a far deeper interest in the study of modern languages than ever before. This, with our small classes, offers an extraordinarily favorable moment to the teacher of German for fruitful experiment. When times are dull and a factory is half idle, the management takes stock and plans and experiments and trains the staff for the days when profitable business shall again arise. The teacher of German is for the moment in the same position. He has also a tremendous encouragement in the spirit of his students to-day. Free from prejudice and unfettered by the traditions of past hatred, Young America looks forward with ardent eyes to a future in which his country is to play a new rôle among the nations. Deeply patriotic, he asks but the means of making himself useful to America and mankind. In furnishing him with a knowledge of German as a part of his essential equipment for leadership and usefulness, we are performing a truly patriotic duty.

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